

Ash

by ebonbird

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Summary: 3rd story in the 'Between' arc Jun remembers and grieves.

Ash

Summary: It is the eve of year two of Pax Gatchaman. This is third story in the Between arc. It is third after Between and Between II: the Long Walk.

>Disclaimer: The characters do not belong to me. They are used without permission. Tatsunoko, Co. Leave me be, this is flattery.
Thanks: To my maker, and those who remind me that the universe is unfolding as it ought.

>Notes: No it's not canon Gatch. If you mind, get over it. The place depicted is inspired by Gatchaman, BotP and the Gatchaman OAV's. First posted June 23, 2000. Completed on June 25, 2000.
Tunes that played during the writing of this: Breathe on Me - Ashton, Becker, Dente; Angels - Ashton, Becker, Dente; Could I Be Your Girl - Jan Arden, Stupid Girl - Garbage, Variations on a Theme - comp. Eric Satie, Contra la Corriente - Marc Anthony, A Life Less Ordinary - Ash, A Whiter Shade of Pale - Procul Harum, Dido - Take My Hand.

* * *

>First Integrated Island Bank burned, like much of Utoland, in the aftermath of the leader of Galactor, Berg Katse's, suicide.<p>Jun had the presence of mind to search, running faster than she'd thought possible, unwilling to lose anything more of Joe's since she'd returned to the spot where he'd fallen in the caverns beneath Cross Karocorum and found a smoking fissure in his place. Ken and Ryu took turns breaking open the box. Jun held it open against her abdomen as each took out the letter addressed to him specifically.<p>

Jun closed the safety deposit box and tucked it under her arm. It was still warm from the burning of the bank. It left sooty welts on her heated skin.

His second letter to her was waiting for her on her computer in her apartment.

She approached the terminal with its single blinking cursor and fell to her carpeted floor, knowing, knowing what it was.

_Your lying in my bunk and I want to be in it
>with you. And I just lied to you. you're sad.
Don't be. You're stronger than you know,
>you could make me stay but you can feel
it, too, its not meant to be, angel. You've
>always been my Angel. Mama sent you to
me so I wouldn't forget what goodness is.
>I can feel your life in me making me stronger
for just for a little while. You need to sleep
>but you burn so bright and you've given me
so much. Don't cry, angel, I'm sorry. You
>could make me stay. You're stronger than
you think, but I can't let you make me. Juni,
>II you. So much, angel. Get out of this shit
business. Get in a relationship with Ken,
>live the love you deserve.

He'd signed it with his birth name.

Is it because I look white? Jun wondered as a fat, earnest-looking North American forced a hand-sized laser-printed booklet she didn't want into her hand.

She'd broken her own rule and worn shoes that hurt, which was appropriate considering the occasion for which she was breaking them in. Despite the discomfort Jun closed her hand around the pamphlet.

"This contains a very important message," said the woman. "It could have great meaning and impact on your life."

"Thank you," Jun replied for politeness' sake.

Touching her arm, the stranger said, "If I could talk to you for a minute,"

Her temper snapping, Jun met the woman's uncertain gaze and said precisely, "This lowly female has obligations and though this lowly female is honored that you have noticed her, this lowly female cannot in good conscience continue to allow you to pay attention to her."

So there, Jun thought. But the woman only looked confused.

The simpleton.

"Good bye," Jun tossed out, and letting her hair whip into the woman's face, shoved past her.

The laser-printed pamphlet she shoved into her purse, thinking, _Dammit, don't stupid foreigners get that this is Utoland and we don't go for this kind of thing?_

_What is it? How did she dare approach me? I'm dressed up. I'm

obviously busy. Maybe it's guilt. Maybe I'm exuding it through my pores or something._

She'd watched Joe give into vengeance and said nothing, done nothing as he fell out of love with life. Other than, "Have another drink: it's on me," she'd been worse than useless. Offered him a place to crash only some of the times that he should not have been alone.

Jun had failed him. She'd protected Joe's health and life on the battlefield only to drop the ball when he started falling apart in front of her.

Tomorrow was the national holiday. She and Ken and Ryu and Jinpei sitting in VIP section while fake thems wore fake birdstyles. Nambu had wanted them in the real thing, but Ken insisted that if the surviving four were going to be listening to commemorative speeches, and standing around looking science ninja team-ish, the damn styles would at least fit.

Jun rode home without her helmet, taking curves faster than was safe; empty air to her left, sheer rock face to her right.

Ryu had already started dinner when she got back to the Snack J. She had smelled the garlic from two doors down. He held his thumb up appreciatively when she entered the kitchen from the alley. Jun caught her reflection in the side of the highly polished metal refrigerator-- in gray, she looked a fashionable ghost.

Ken was standing in front of the pool table, leaning on the cue, concentrating. He had yet to break, the multicolored balls, blue, green, yellow, orange, broken here and there by white still in the black triangle closure. He looked great of course, having managed to become more beautiful in a more graceful, less bulky way in the year since they beat Galactor and Joe left them, his body still compact, his arms subtly powerful. He wore gloves.

Jun sent Ryu and Ken upstairs to clean up and burned the rest of dinner. Jinpei smelled the acridity and nipped across the street to the store for pre-packaged bi bim bap and fried up a carton of eggs - half for Ryu, half for her, him and Ken.

Jun's disaster was good for a laugh, and the three guys teased her about it through dinner and cartoons in the cramped apartment living room, afterward.

The four of them slept in the living room, no problem. Ryu and Ken kept toothbrushes and changes of clothing in Jinpei's room. Not soon after Joe's funeral Jun and Jinpei had gone out and bought color coordinating bathrobes and towels; orange on green for Ryu, white and blue for Ken. Jun hadn't meant to buy their uniform colors but there it was.

The next evening found Jun inside the coffee house, sitting at the dark green force molded table, shoving her straw again and again into her parfait glass, while the fat North American sung and talked about how wonderful her religion was for everyone in the room.

The missionary eventually got off of the stage, put down her guitar, and approached Jun.

"May I sit here?" the woman asked, and actually waited for Jun's invite.

"Sure," Jun replied.

Sitting, the woman said, "You look familiar. I feel as if we have a connection. Have we--?"

Jun slapped the much wrinkled pages of the tract on the open work table.

"What is it?" Jun asked. "Do I look like one of you or something? I've lived here all my life. What is it about you people? What is it about you people that you always come to me with this stuff? Don't you think it's rude to get in a person's face and presume to tell them what they should and should not believe?"

The woman blinked. Then asked, "What would you say if I said I used to think the same way you did?"

"When did you forget about manners?"

"God had a plan for my life."

"Did it include rape? Being raped? Killing or being killed? Betraying everything you ever believed in or thought might be remotely true because the most important thing in your life, that made life worth living, made it necessary? Or you thought maybe it did?"

"There's no sin too great for God to forgive."

"Sin? What does that mean? All of you say, write, the same nothings. Why should I give my life over to you people and your God when I've already given it over to, to-- well, when I've got a damn good return for the things I've done and can do?"

"How old are you?"

"Nineteen."

"You've had a hard life, haven't you?" the woman asked sympathetically, tried to ask sympathetically.

"I'm a twenty-something Utolander. That's not hard a guess."

The woman was very quiet, her attention divided between Jun and something else, her eyes blurry, or something.

Fluidly, Jun pushed her chair back and was up and out of it as quickly as she'd been trained to be, as quickly as she'd learned to be after two years fighting Galactor and the twelve months after during which she'd trained harder to avoid going soft-- just in horrible case. Didn't matter; the woman managed to get the upper hand. Lightly, it rested atop Jun's. "Soldiers are beloved of God, too. All have sinned and fall short of the glory of God."

The missionary said the word 'God' strangely, as if by saying it she might give offense to Jun-- whom she had so easily given offense to just the day before. To Jun's subdued amazement, the woman continued

to talk.

"There was a mercenary who asked a holy man what he had to do to in order to enter the kingdom of heaven, the holy man told him to kill only who you're supposed to kill and don't take bribes."

"How'd you get a visa?" Jun asked.

Walking in the gray sling-back shoes that hurt, Jun returned to Joe's grave. It was one of the better kept ones, new dirt settling between the short blades of grass. She sat side-legged on the ground despite her white stockings and white micro-fiber skirt. Fingering the flowers that had been planted for Joe earlier that day, she talked aloud, even though his body wasn't there and she didn't feel like he was dead. He was dead to her, to them, and she guessed that was all that mattered. She took the bus home.

Ken once told Ryu that he took the bus when he needed to be reminded of what was worthy about humanity. Jun wasn't a target in her expensive clothes because she and the guys had cured thugs of picking on lone pedestrians in her neighborhood.

They hated bullies.

Ken was there. Jinpei didn't need a babysitter, and the times when Jun had to be out someplace overnight Ryu would stay, but Ken had been coming around a lot lately.

He took one look at her and led her up to her room.

If a living person could be airbrushed, every part of them super-saturated with passion that made what was light about them brighter and their darks darker, then that was what had happened to Ken-- grief, maybe. His eyes were a little bluer than anyone else's, his dark-brown hair a little bit glossier, his emotions much more clear-cut.

His curvy torso narrowed into his marvelous hips fluidly, like a woven leather belt. He dropped backwards, kicking off his shoes and letting his arms open wide, his Adam's apple suddenly prominent. He'd never been tall, but all of a sudden Ken looked big, as in There's a big muscular man in my bed. He'd come through for her and Jinpei-- and Ryu, taking care of them in a way he'd never made time for when they were the science ninja team.

Saying no to Nambu was good for him.

Ken was lying down on her side of the bed. He always did. He didn't know. She'd slept on the right for so long, hoping he'd come through the window and take the left, that it felt strange to have him on her side. Even though what had happened with Joe had cancered her in the brain so badly, leaving behind regrets and fears and memories, physical, emotional, every kind there was, that she couldn't examine the idea of her skin-to-skin with someone with whom she was already heart-to-heart.

Ken crooked his arm, it was thick and pretty in places a man's arms weren't usually both. He wore the gloves, dark red, and Jun wondered if he knew what it did to her when he wore the gloves.

Jun hesitated only a moment, and thought, _What of it?_ She needed his body. Inside of her was tight and uncomfortable, tightness trying to come out of her eyes and ears and throat. She wasn't hungry. She wasn't sleepy. She wasn't anything but tight. Even feverish would have been preferable, and she didn't want to explain to Jinpei that after going to Joe's memorial service with him and Ken and Ryu and Nambu she'd abandoned him to go fight with a missionary and spend more time at Joe's grave.

Leaning on her hands she eased on her side next to Ken. He made a pillow of his arm for her, the curved mass of his shoulder authoritative and she lay her cheek against the softness of his T-shirt over his skin.

A cigarette would be nice.

Ken reached over his head, his hand going for the small night table by the bed. He pulled open the drawer, curved his neck a little to see what he was doing, and fished out the gum she kept there, ignoring the condoms. He always did. One-handed he unwrapped piece after piece and wadded it into his mouth. She could hear him chew. She put her hand on his chest beside his hand and he said, "Oops." He reached into her bedside table and brought forward another packet of gum which he handed to her. With a minimum of movement Jun angled the pointed end of the unopened blue and white package on the hard rise of Ken's pectoral muscle.

Ken released air from his lungs, inhaled loudly and slowly.

"You going to be okay?" he asked.

She thought about it. The sound of Ken's chewing was distracting and comforting.

He swallowed, a slick but bumpy muffled sound. "I'm not so sure, either. Some days I'm fine."

"Others," Jun said quietly speaking the word long and rested the gum beneath her hand.

"You ever going to tell me what really happened that day?"

"Will you be mad at me if I don't?"

"I couldn't stay angry. You're my friend."

That feeling of tightness in Jun's chest and face and head and ears, that was a sob and Ken's body went stiff when it escaped her.

Jinpei had gotten louder in the last year. They heard him coming down the hall. He was already in his pajamas, brown and purple, printed with birds of prey - Joe's colors. They had feet. He held his blanket against his chest, his hair stuck straight up. He was a smaller darkness at the threshold of Jun's room.

"Onechan," Jinpei said using that street Japanese honorific he refused to be cured of to address her. Then, "Aniki," and shuffled forward. He got on the bed between them in his space, turned towards Ken and snuggled into his chest. Sometimes Ken touched Jinpei's shoulder, sometimes he touched Jun's hair. Jinpei slept as soundly as

he ever did so Ken didn't get up to open the window and let in some air. Jinpei snored wetly. Ken thought his thoughts.

Jun watched them.

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* * *

>I don't know what happened. These characters won't leave me alone.
Email me, and let me know what you think. <p>Thanks for reading.<p>

End
file.